

# ACTS 15 - THE COUNCIL OF JERUSALEM

## Introduction

Acts 15 - the pivotal point of the book of Acts. Focus has been on apostles in Jerusalem and surrounding areas, then Paul is introduced and he begins his first 'missionary journey' preaching the gospel to non-Jews (Gentiles).

## Christianity: a Jewish sect?

Consistent theme - apostles (disciples) were Jewish, as was Jesus, and largely preached to Jews that Jesus was the Messiah.

Much of the OT points to something else, something in the future.

I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
and between your offspring and her offspring;  
he shall bruise your head,  
and you shall bruise his heel."

(Genesis 3:15 ESV)

Was the first, pointing to the time when Jesus would defeat Satan, though he himself would be wounded.

Throughout the OT there are promises for God's people. From when God promises to make Abraham's offspring into a great nation. God promises a nation to Israel when they are captive in Egypt. After they escape, he delivers promises and laws to Moses. He says:

"For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

(Deuteronomy 7:6 ESV)

They knew that they were chosen by God. For the disciples, being Jews, these promises were also true, as they were direct descendants themselves of Abraham - they were part of God's chosen people.

God made promises to David, and to his descendants:

And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly,

(2 Samuel 7:10 ESV)

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son.

(2 Samuel 7:12-14 ESV)

So the Jews were waiting for the descendant of David to come and 'plant them' in their own land, in peace and without war, and without any trouble from their neighbours, somewhere they could live forever.

Part of this promise that they had received was the Law of Moses. This was a set of instructions on how to live their lives, from what they could and couldn't eat, how to worship, what to do when they sinned, and many many more instructions. The way to win favour with God was to do the things he had commanded in the law:

But this command I gave them: 'Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people. And walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you.'

(Jeremiah 7:23 ESV)

Jews didn't tend to share their faith with unbelievers. If someone wanted to become a Jew, they too had to follow all of the laws, all of the rituals that God had commanded the nation of Israel to follow. They would have to change their diet, and worship in the temple. And men would have to be circumcised as an outward sign of an inner devotion to God.

The apostles in Jerusalem preached a message to Jews that the Messiah had come, and that the promises of the OT were being fulfilled in their time. Because of Jesus' death there was no need for the ritual sacrifices, but otherwise they remained Jewish, and from what we know continued to follow a largely Jewish way of life, albeit whilst preaching and teaching about Jesus, and trusting in him for their salvation.

## Christianity - a Gentile faith?

At the same time as the gospel was spreading to Jews in Jerusalem and Samaria, although not everyone believed, Paul and others were having great success preaching salvation by faith in Jesus to non-Jews. Previous weeks have looked at Paul's early missionary journeys and the successful planting of churches in Galatia.

It appears that after this journey, Paul and Barnabas return to their home church in Antioch in Syria, before travelling to Jerusalem for a big meeting of christian leaders. Around this time (either in Antioch or on the journey to Jerusalem) Paul appears to have written the book of Galatians.

In it he tells of a confrontation he had with Peter:

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

(Galatians 2:11-14 ESV)

Cephas = Peter

The issue here was that there were some people (who claimed to represent James the apostle in Jerusalem) who were teaching that in order to be saved people needed to observe Jewish law and tradition as well as having faith in Jesus. It wasn't enough to believe, you had to live like a Jew also.

Much of the remainder of Galatians is about faith and freedom:

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

(Galatians 2:15-16 ESV)

We Jews know that we have no advantage of birth over "non-Jewish sinners." We know very well that we are not set right with God by rule-keeping but only through personal faith in Jesus Christ. How do we know? We tried it—and we had the best system of rules the world has ever seen! Convinced that no human being can please God by self-improvement, we believed in Jesus as the Messiah so that we might be set right before God by trusting in the Messiah, not by trying to be good.

What actually took place is this: I tried keeping rules and working my head off to please God, and it didn't work. So I quit being a "law man" so that I could be God's man. Christ's life showed me how, and enabled me to do it. I identified myself completely with him. Indeed, I have been crucified with Christ. My ego is no longer central. It is no longer important that I appear righteous before you or have your good opinion, and I am no longer driven to impress God. Christ lives in me. The life you see me living is not "mine," but it is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I am not going to go back on that.

(Galatians 2: 15-16; 19-21 Message)

So Paul has already had an argument with one of the top guys about Jewish laws, he's made his mind up and he's literally written a book on it.

Then he and Barnabas go to Jerusalem to take part in a debate:

## The Jerusalem Council

But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."

(Acts 15:1-5 ESV)

This debate appears to be about something minor - circumcision, the outward sign of devotion to God. It was, though, about something much more, as we have seen. Paul regarded this as an attack on the central, most important part of the gospel, that salvation is achieved by faith in Christ. God's new covenant was not dependant upon outward signs of devotion, rather on a hearts response to the call and goodness of God.

The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

(Acts 15:6-11 ESV)

Peter gets to go first - back from exile after escaping a Roman execution, and probably still mindful of the rebuke he received from Paul.

And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written,

"After this I will return,  
and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen;  
I will rebuild its ruins,  
and I will restore it,  
that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord,  
and all the Gentiles who are called by my name,  
says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old."

Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."

(Acts 15:12-21 ESV)

James, Jesus' brother and apparently the most senior apostle since Peter left Jerusalem starts with an inflammatory statement. He says that God has taken from Gentiles a people for his name. His argument is that God is now choosing non-Jews to inherit the promises that he gave to the people he called for his name previously.

He then reads a passage from Amos and says that this was God's plan all along - that Gentiles and Jews were co-heirs to the promise of Salvation, that the promise given to David of a peaceful place to

dwell in, where the rule of God lasted forever; that this was open to all. Not only that, they decided that Gentiles did not have to live as Jews in order to inherit this promise.

What James was saying was that all the Jewish stuff, the rituals and the signs, that they weren't necessary for being saved, being redeemed, becoming a part of the people of God.

This theme is repeated again and again throughout the new testament:

Paul's great theological exploration of salvation and faith says:

What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? As indeed he says in Hosea,

“Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,’  
and her who was not beloved I will call ‘beloved.’”

“And in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’  
there they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’”

(Romans 9:22-26 ESV)

Peter himself writes (1 Peter is addressed to churches in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia)

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

(1 Peter 2:9-10 ESV)

The Jews missed the point of much of the OT, as it pointed to something else. The temple sacrifices didn't take away sin, they pointed to Jesus, the ultimate sacrifice. The law wasn't wrong, it just wasn't capable of giving life like faith in Jesus was.

Acts 15 appears to be an argument about circumcision, an outward sign of an inner devotion. It has been suggested that circumcision itself was an activity that pointed to another:

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

(Colossians 2:11-12 ESV)

Written by Paul, 14 years later.

**What happens next?**

This is the turning point in the book of Acts, and arguably the New Testament, perhaps even the history of the church. The leaders of the church (and notice how humbly Paul isn't even a part of the decision making process!?) have decreed that salvation is through faith in Christ, we are unable to add to it in any way.